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20 **SOME INITIAL COMMENTS ON THE KOMKOM VASE DISCOVERED AT BAKING POT, BELIZE**

Christophe Helmke, Julie A. Hoggarth, Jaime J. Awe, Sarah E. Bednar, and Amber L. Johnson

In 2015 and 2016 the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance (BVAR) project recovered a remarkable polychrome vase through its excavations of artifact-rich deposits besides stairside outsets and within corners of courtyards and plazas, both within the royal palace and adjoining plaza of Group B, at the site of Baking Pot in western Belize. Whereas many questions still surround the nature of these deposits, their formation appears to coincide with peri-abandonment events and the materials they contain shed light on the last inhabitants of these palaces. Here we describe the fragmentary vase that bears a long glyphic text found in one of these deposits, which we have named the Komkom Vase. This vase and its context have a bearing on the nature and formation of these artifactual deposits as well as broader processes of the Terminal Classic period across the central Maya lowlands.

Introduction

The astounding and unique ceramic vessel, designated as the Komkom Vase (Figure 1), was found in an artifact-rich deposit at the archaeological site of Baking Pot in western Belize. The other ceramic remains of this deposit can be assigned typologically, on the basis of form and decorative modes, to the late facet of the Spanish Lookout ceramic complex (Gifford 1976: 225-227) and as such can be said to date to the Terminal Classic, the period associated with the Classic Maya “Collapse”, which spans from the ninth century onwards. Based on some of the titles found on the vessel we have named it the Komkom Vase in reference to a locality of that name in the eastern central Lowlands that is cited in the texts of the nearby site of Naranjo in the Peten, as well as on portable objects found at Buenavista del Cayo, in western Belize (see Houston et al. 1992: 507-508; Yaeger et al. 2015: 185-188). As a status object that dates to the Terminal Classic period, the Komkom Vase is an exceptional piece of evidence, produced during the precarious final decades of centralized rule of ‘godly kings’. Its archaeological context testifies to the social upheavals and eventual abandonment of the royal courts and entire settlements. Here we will introduce this remarkable vase, as well as describe its physical properties and the context and circumstances of its discovery, but devote most attention to the glyphic text that adorns it.

Context

The BVAR project has been conducting extensive settlement surveys and excavations at



Figure 1. Section and exterior elevation of the Komkom Vase (graphic and composite photograph by Christophe Helmke).

the major center of Baking Pot since 1992 (e.g. Conlon 1993; Audet 2006; Helmke et al. 2015; Hoggarth 2012; Hoggarth et al. 2014b, 2016) (Figure 2). Since 2013, Julie Hoggarth and Jaime Awe—Co-Director and Director of BVAR, respectively—as well as collaborators (Kennett et al. 2015; Hoggarth et al. 2016) have initiated a

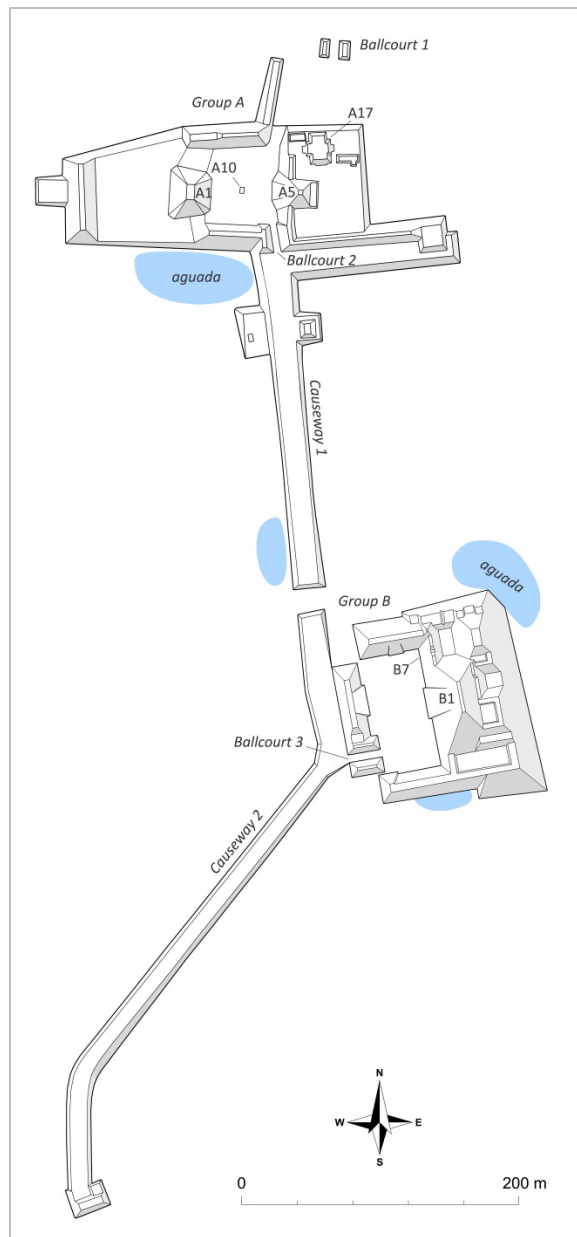


Figure 2. Plan of the monumental epicenter of Baking Pot showing the extent of Group B and the location of Str. B7, the audiencia (plan by Christophe Helmke).

research program that is focused on better understanding the timing and nature of the Classic Maya ‘Collapse’. To elucidate the timing of the final activities occurring in the monumental epicenter, research at Baking Pot was initiated to identify peri-abandonment deposits, which represent the final activities within the monumental epicenter (Hoggarth et al. 2014b, 2015, 2016; Kennett et al. 2015). These features consist of large quantities of broken ceramics

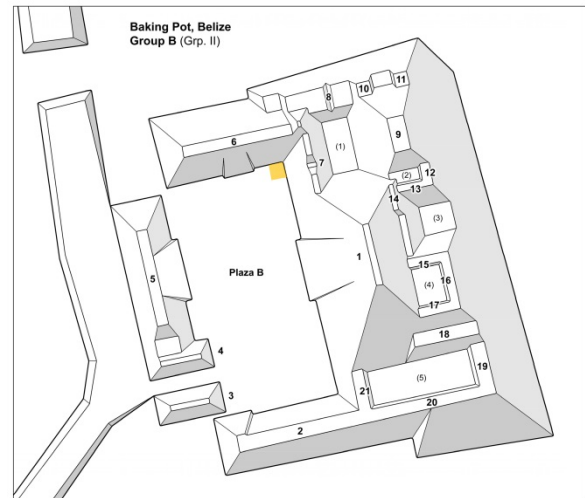


Figure 3. Plan of Group B with the location of the peri-abandonment deposit containing the Komkom Vase indicated. Courtyard designations are provided in parentheses (plan by Christophe Helmke).

(including a large number of polychrome vessels), faunal remains, human remains and other materials found above the terminal floors of plazas and courtyards. Despite the growing literature on the subject, the activities that these features represent have been greatly debated. Scholars view these features as being re-deposited materials from rituals or feasts (Clayton et al. 2005; Garber et al. 1998), the materials from final use of ceremonial public spaces (Guderjan 2004), *de facto* evidence of rapid abandonment (Chase and Chase 2004), domestic middens from post-abandonment squatters (Harrison 1999), and the remains of ritual activities from post-abandonment populations (Awe 2012). As Awe has noted (see also Pendergast and Graham 1981: 17), thin lenses (~2-5 cm) of matrix overlying the terminal plaza floors are often present in the Belize Valley, with materials of such deposits directly above the matrix. This evidence suggests that these palatial spaces were abandoned or fell into disuse for some time prior to the events that formed these peri-abandonment deposits. The radiocarbon research program that has recently been launched by BVAR aims to systematically test all of these hypotheses.

Based on a regional study by Awe (2012) and his colleagues (Awe et al. 2009) on the spatial patterns associated with peri-abandonment deposits at sites across the Belize Valley, excavations were strategically placed in

the plaza and courtyards of Group B at Baking Pot to identify deposits and to recover dateable materials therein. The deposit that interests us here is that of Excavation Unit B7-100 (and its extensions) in 2015 and B7-102 in 2016. These units were placed in the northeastern corner of Plaza B, at the intersection of Structures B6 and B7 (Figure 3). Structure B7 is a multi-room range structure with a central passageway, known as an *audiencia*, which served as the primary and formal entrance into the royal palace of Group B (Hoggarth et al. 2016: 246-255; Helmke 2008: 125-127). The deposit covered an area of approximately 11 m² and spanned the area between the axial stairs, along the south face of Str. B6 and the west face of the *audiencia*, Str. B7 (Figure 4). The feature consisted primarily of ceramic artifacts, including sherds of ceramic serving vessels, two small inkpots, ocarina and flute fragments, in addition to chert lithics, obsidian blades, granite *metate* fragments, a fragmentary slate mace, and faunal remains including animal bone and worked shell, such as a Caribbean conch pendant, mother of pearl *adornos* of freshwater mussels (*Nephronais* sp.) as well as three perforated dwarf olive shells (*Olivella* sp.) (Hoggarth et al. 2016: 255-256) and a carved jadeite pendant. The quantity, diversity of materials, and their quality imply that these materials were elite paraphernalia. Within the peri-abandonment deposit were also three human inhumations, two primary male individuals and one secondary burial (Hoggarth et al. 2016: 250-252). Faunal remains were also noted throughout the deposit, as were human remains, including the cranium of a (likely) male individual (Roseanne Bongiovanni, pers. comm., 2016).

Greatly contributing to the chronology-building research program is the discovery of the Komkom Vase, an elaborate polychrome serving vessel that bears a clear calendrical date and lengthy associated text. As the Long Count date probably refers to its date of manufacture, we are provided with a definite *terminus post quem* for the formation of the deposit. Considering that the vase is not local, but appears to originate from workshops associated with the greater Naranjo court, the presence of this vase at Baking Pot represents a concrete material link between these



Figure 4. a) Exposing the peri-abandonment deposit containing sherds of the Komkom Vase in Excavation Unit B7-102, at the foot of Str. B7 (photograph by Julie Hoggarth).

royal courts, and testifies to an alliance, link of vassalage or matrimony, on par with similar vases recovered at Buenavista del Cayo (Houston et al. 1992; Reents-Budet et al. 2000) and Baking Pot (Helmke and Awe 2012: 75-80; Reents-Budet et al. 2005). Other glyphic texts that reflect ties to Naranjo have been recovered from other sites in the greater Belize Valley, such as at Xunantunich to the west and Hershey to the east (e.g. Helmke and Awe 2012: 61, 75, 78; McAnany et al. 2004: 297, Fig. 3). The discovery of the Komkom vase suggests that the site of Baking Pot, and/or individuals visiting the site, played important roles within the broader geopolitical context of the Classic Maya ‘Collapse’ in the eastern Maya lowlands.

The Vase

We recovered the vase as a series of 82 sherds, over the course of two field seasons between the 7th of July 2015 and the 30th of July

2016. Preliminary curation and reconstruction of the vessel indicates that the vase now stands to c. 20.3 cm in height. The rim has suffered chipping and was eventually trimmed in antiquity with a sharp object in an attempt to roughly fix the rim of the vase. As a result, the total original height of the vessel remains indeterminate, but based on surviving features we estimate it at c. 21.7 cm. The base has a diameter of 15.1 cm and tapers slightly inwards towards the rim, producing lightly insloping sides (Figure 1). Based on interior measurements the vase could have contained as much as 3 liters (c. 100 fl. oz.) and based on surface area, as much as 62 % of the original vase is preserved.

While the interior is unslipped, the exterior is evenly applied with a cream slip and is decorated with a very extensive glyphic text, rendered in dark brown-to-black paint. Several glyphs are also accentuated by the use of red slip, and the base is delineated by an orange band, which we surmise would also have been applied along the original rim. Based on these features the vase can be identified as a Chinos Black-on-cream, a type established by Robert E. Smith and James C. Gifford (1966: 156) that is well known from a series of workshops associated with Naranjo and Holmul in the eastern Peten (see Ball 1993: 262). Prominent find spots of Chinos Black-on-cream in the western Belize Valley include Buenavista del Cayo (Reents-Budet et al. 2000: 101-106) and to a lesser degree Cahal Pech, and now evidently Baking Pot as well. The presence of these imported ceramics testifies to connections and possible alliances between Belize Valley sites and foreign city-states in antiquity, and the discovery of the Komkom Vase reiterates these relationships.

The Text

The glyphic text adorning the Komkom Vase has several peculiarities that distinguish it from other known ceramic objects. For one, the length of the text marks it as truly one of a kind. As far as we are aware, its 202 glyph blocks may well be the longest glyphic text on any ceramic object discovered. Two other ceramic vessels—unfortunately both without archaeological provenience—have texts comprising 88 glyphs (these are designated as K1440 and K6571 in the

Table 1. A selection of the longest glyphic texts in the Maya area in comparison to the Komkom Vase discovered at Baking Pot.

| Site | Text | Length |
|---------------------|---|------------|
| Copan | Hieroglyphic Stair | c. 2200 |
| Palenque | Temple of the Inscriptions | 617 |
| Yaxchilan | Hieroglyphic Stair 1 | c. 493 |
| Yaxchilan | Hieroglyphic Stair 3 | 343 |
| Palenque | Palace Tablet | 247 |
| Tikal | Stela 31 | > 221 |
| Palenque | Bench, Temple 19 | 215 |
| Tikal | Temple of the Inscriptions | 206 |
| Yaxchilan | Hieroglyphic Stair 2 | > 203 |
| Baking Pot | Komkom Vase | 202 |
| La Corona | Hieroglyphic Stair 2 | > 198 |
| Yaxchilan | Hieroglyphic Stair 5 | c. 182 |
| El Palmar | Hieroglyphic Stair | c. 164 |
| Itzan | Stela 17 | 156 |
| Uxul | Altar 2 | c. 149 |
| Caracol | Stela 22 | 140 |
| Cancuen | Panel 1 | 140 |
| Naranjo | Stela 28 | 139 |
| Naranjo | Stela 31 | 138 |
| Sabana Piletas | Hieroglyphic Stair 1 | 136 |
| Tikal | Stela 24 | c. 136 |
| Naranjo | Stela 30 | 126 |
| Caracol | Altar 21 | 129 |
| Naranjo | Stela 23 | 113 |
| Naranjo | Altar 1 | 107 |
| Naranjo | Stela 46 | > 105 |
| Naranjo | Stela 29 | 104 |
| Yaxchilan | Lintel 10 | 103 |
| Naranjo | Stela 12 | 100 |
| Palenque | Panel of 96 glyphs | 96 |
| Ek Balam | Mural of 96 glyphs | 96 |
| Naranjo | Stela 18 | 96 |
| Naranjo | Stela 22 | 91 |
| Provenience Unknown | Vase of the 88 glyphs (K1440) | 88 |
| Provenience Unknown | Dynastic Vase (K6751) | 88 |
| Naranjo | Stela 13 | 84 |
| Edzna | Hieroglyphic Stair 1 | c. 84 |
| Yaxchilan | Hieroglyphic Stair 4 | c. 82 |
| Calakmul | Hieroglyphic Stair, Str. 13 | > 79 |
| Caracol (?) | Hieroglyphic Stair of K'an II, Str. B5? | > 78 |

photographic archives of Justin Kerr, see <http://research.mayavase.com/kerrmaya.html>).

One additional ceramic object without archaeological provenience, but which may originally stem from the greater Tikal area, is said to be adorned with 144 glyphs (Guido Krempel, pers. comm. 2016). These lengthy texts are clearly exceptions to the rule, since most ceramics that bear texts usually record no more than the dedicatory expression (known as the Primary Standard Sequence) as well as a record of ownership, essentially an extensive name-tag, specifying the names and titles of the original owner (MacLeod and Reents-Budet 1994).

Given its extraordinary long text, the Komkom Vase is thus on par, in terms of length,

with the texts on the hieroglyphic stairs at Yaxchilan, the lengthy panels at Palenque and some of the longest stela texts at Tikal, Naranjo and Caracol (see Table 1). The discovery of the Komkom Vase therefore represents an amazing find for all the wealth of information that this text contains. In addition, the text distinguishes itself from the more common format of Classic Maya narratives, since it is not focused on the life, times and deeds of a principal individual or royal actor. Instead, a whole array of different agents and patients are introduced and none distinguish themselves as primary in any way. One further feature is that the text is initiated by a lengthy calendrical record, thereby duplicating the format of monumental texts. This too is rather unusual since only very few ceramic texts are known to bear calendrical records.

Based on the size of the glyphs employed, and the thematic content, the entire text can be sub-divided into three major sections (Figure 5). The first entails the calendrical record and assumes 8 % of the text by number of glyph blocks. The second, and most substantial portion of the text is given over to the lengthy historical narrative. This occupies as much as 74 % of the text (again by number of glyph blocks). This leaves the third and final portion (18 %) to provide a lengthy parentage statement, or pedigree, of the original owner, specifying the names and titles of the mother and father, in turn (Figure 6). Below we will first present the pedigree and comment on the calendrical record in order to better situate ourselves, before reviewing the historical narrative.

Pedigree

Unusually, the names and titles of the owner are not provided in the text, suggesting that this may have been implicit, the historical narrative and pedigree together making it clear who owned this spectacular vase. The mother was clearly drawn from the royal house of Naranjo, since she bears the *Sak Chuwen* title that was the preserve of that dynasty (see Reents 1986: 155). In addition one of her titles, possibly read as *yok'in*, is qualified by the place name *Wak Kabal*, 'Six Earth', one of the territorial toponyms of Naranjo (see MacLeod and Reents-Budet 1994: 129-130). Much like her spouse, she held the title *bakab*, lit. 'head-

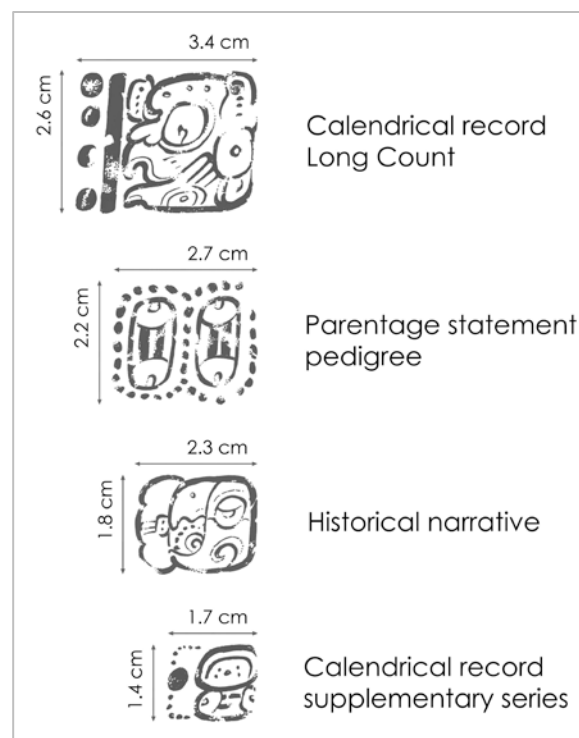


Figure 5. A selection of glyph blocks illustrating the hierarchy of average size-gradations employed in the text on the Komkom Vase. The largest glyphs were used as part of the Long Count, the second largest as part of the pedigree section, the smallest as part of the supplementary series and the intervening size for the historical narrative (drawings by Christophe Helmke).

earth' or by extension "chief", one of the most exalted titles of ancient Maya royalty.

The father of the original owner is named *Sak Witzil Baah* ('white mountain gopher'), a namesake of the king known as K'an II at Caracol, who bore precisely the same name in his youth, prior to his accession at which point he received his regnal name (see Grube 1994: 104). Interestingly, the father is also designated by a title of origin as *Ajsak Nikte* or 'he of the white plumeria (place)', suggesting that he originated from the locality known as *Sak Nikte*. From the many glyphic texts discovered at La Corona in the northern Peten, it is apparent that one of the principal toponyms of this site was precisely *Sak Nikte* (Stuart and Houston 1994: 39; Canuto and Barrientos Q. 2013:1). Nevertheless, since toponyms can, at times, refer to multiple localities of the same name, we assume that his origins are rather local and that this toponym also names a place in the vicinity, in the eastern Peten or western Belize. The same



Figure 6. Roll-out of the Komkom Vase showing the division of the text according to thematic content. Red demarcates the initial calendrical section, orange the lengthy historical narrative and yellow the pedigree of the original owner that closes the text (composite photograph and graphic by Christophe Helmke).

attribution of origin can be made from the royal title borne by the father, since he is styled as *Komkom Ajaw* ‘Komkom King’. This locality is mentioned in the texts of Naranjo as a place that suffered attacks at the hands of *K’ahk’ Tiliw Chan Chaahk* in AD 696 and 726 (see Martin and Grube 2000: 137-139; Helmke and Kettunen 2011: 63) and the same toponym has turned up on finds made at the site of Buenavista del Cayo (Houston et al. 1992: 507-508; Yaeger et al. 2015: 185-188). The Komkom kings also bore a title designating them as being part of the “eastern reaches of the seventh province” (*elk’in uhuk tzuk*) (see K2730; see also Beliaev 2000), and the same title is found in the pedigree of the father here also. Based on these references it seems likely that ancient Komkom was located to the east of Naranjo, quite possibly designating an archaeological site in the western Belize Valley. One distinct possibility is that Buenavista del Cayo is the Komkom of the glyphic texts, but other sites remain suitable candidates, such as El Pilar, Las Ruinas de Arenal, or Guacamayo, to name only a few. Until these sites are investigated further, however, we will have to remain cautious in our

attribution of this ancient toponym. Nevertheless, considering the prominence given to the Komkom on the vessel, we have decided to name the vase after this toponym, in honor of its original owner.

Calendrics

The calendrical record that initiates the text, as a whole, is rather lengthy and records a complete Long Count as well as a supplementary series. Whereas most of the Long Count has been recovered, one small part has not. What remains of the Long Count is 9.19.#.15.8, wherein the pound sign marks off the missing segment. The missing coefficient designates the vague year or period of 360 days that approximates a solar year. Considering the limited amount of space provided for the numeral, the Long Count date can be correlated to a date between AD 811 and 815, using reconstructions ranging from 9.19.0.15.8 to 9.19.4.15.8. Clearly this is a very late date, at the twilight of the Terminal Classic that is traditionally considered to be in vigor by 10.0.0.0.0 or AD 830. Close examination of the remaining elements suggest that the most

plausible Long Count date is 9.19.1.15.8, corresponding to 23rd of April AD 812 (using the 584286 GMT+1 correlation coefficient).

The Long Count is followed by additional calendrical information, including the Lord of the Night (G2), the title of this supernatural entity (Glyph F), an abbreviated lunar series, and most surprisingly of all an abridged record of the 819-day calendar. This obscure calendrical cycle is known from fewer than two dozen texts throughout the Maya lowlands. The majority are known from the western Maya area, especially from Palenque, Yaxchilan and sites in that vicinity, including Tonina and from the southeast at Copan and Quirigua (see MacLeod 1989; Valencia Rivera 2015: 214-239). As such, the discovery of another example of the 819-day calendar is unexpected to say the least, especially in this part of the Maya lowlands, on a vase, in a text that is of such late date.

Whereas the event or action that transpired on this date is not recorded, we surmise that this date records the dedication of the vase. This temporal anchor is of great significance since it provides a secure lower-end boundary for modeling the ¹⁴C AMS dates obtained from human bone samples recovered in the same artifact-rich archaeological deposits that also contained the vase at Baking Pot. We look forward to developing a Bayesian chronological model that includes stratigraphic information with direct AMS ¹⁴C dates on faunal and human remains, as well as charcoal within the deposit. The inclusion of such a late Long Count date in the text of the Komkom Vase offers a rare opportunity to model the stratigraphic deposition of the peri-abandonment deposit using the hieroglyphic date as *a priori* data. As the sherds from the vase were located in the medial and upper strata of the feature, we can constrain any radiocarbon distributions for the entire deposit to the period before AD 812 using that *terminus post quem* date.

Historical Narrative

The historical narrative is divided into ten major clauses that span from the 15th of February AD 799 to the 30th of August of the same year. These events are thus at least thirteen years prior to the Long Count date recorded at the onset of the text. This implies that the historical

narrative is retrospective and it may well have been copied from another source, such as a codex providing a detailed annal or historical record. Based on the span of dates, the narrative on the vase is extremely detailed. Paradoxically, despite its length, the text covers only a very short temporal window. Whereas other texts exist that have a relatively limited time-depth and scope, this should be contrasted to contemporary monuments from nearby Naranjo (i.e. Stelae 10, 12, 13, 14, 19, 32 and 35), which in shorter texts have narratives ranging between 4 and 39 years, with a mean of 15 years per narrative. As such, the pace of the narrative on the Komkom Vase is clearly a fast one, with events developing with very small temporal intervals between them. In fact, the narrative can be divided into two major episodes, one spanning from the 15th of February until the 21st of the month and the second from 19th of July to the 30th of August. During the first episode, events are separated by only two days apiece, whereas during the second episode, events are separated by spans of only 4 to 12 days. In addition, many clauses refer to multiple events on the same date and we thereby obtain a narrative that records events at a very fast pace, and in unprecedented detail. The wealth of information makes it difficult to properly characterize the text since it is so unusually detailed, especially in comparison to contemporaneous texts of the Late-to-Terminal Classic.

To provide an overview of the text, we can present the narrative according to its constituent parts, namely 1) agents and patients, 2) verbs and actions, and 3) toponyms. We present an overview of each of these rubrics in turn.

Agents and Patients: By agents were refer to the individuals that are said to undertake various actions, or are the ones that are given credit for a particular event. In contrast, we have the patients, that is to say those that are affected by a given action. Add to that is the twist that many sentences are recorded in the intransitive, wherein the agent/patient is not specifically recorded or is missing. As such we have information as to agent/patient for fourteen cases whereas these are unspecified/known in

approximately nine cases. One additional oddity is that the majority of individuals are not named as such, but rather are referred to by title alone. Reading the text, one gets the impression that we are in the middle of a much larger narrative, wherein all the actors should be known entities, but these are discussed without the benefit of any introduction, as if this was provided in an earlier part of the narrative that has not been reiterated on the vase. Nonetheless, the primary agents include a) ‘he of the south’, b) ‘he of the north’, c) *Ajwalte* ‘he of *Walte*’, d) *Ajbaluun Chab* ‘he of nine lands’, and e) a figure named *Took’ Yas(aan)*. The first two figures are ones that bear identical titles, and although unfortunately these resist decipherment, they are distinguished by the cardinal directions *nojol* ‘south’ and *xaman* ‘north’. The same figures, or groups of people, are named in the texts of Naranjo, perhaps populations or lesser functionaries serving their king in the southern and northern reaches of the kingdom (see Grube 2004: 208-209; Helmke and Kettunen 2011: 11-16; Tokovinine 2013: 91-97; Martin et al. 2016: 6, 11). The remaining agents are not known outside of this text and as such little more can be said about them, in terms of origin or titles. On the side of the patients we have a) *K’inich Lakamtun*, or ‘radiant stela’, king of *Yaxa*’ (present-day Yaxha in Guatemala), and b) one *Ajmutu’l* or ‘he of Tikal’, named at the very end of the text. In order to sketch out the agent-tracking of the narrative, we have plotted these figures out according to the clause in which they occur (Table 2). In so doing we can see that many of the actors are introduced sequentially and with little overlap. As such we can see that there is no definite protagonist, hero, or main character. Also, whereas the first half of the narrative is given over to the agents, patients are introduced in the second half, with the king of *Yaxa*’ at the brunt end of the martial actions inflicted upon him by *Took’ Yas(aan)*, suggesting military forays to the west of Naranjo around Lake Yaxha. Perhaps, embrazened by these successes, the agents extended their reach further to the west, towards Tikal, which may explain why an individual bearing the title of origin *Ajmutu’l* appears in the penultimate sentence of the narrative.

Table 2. Agent-tracking of the narrative, plotting out actors according to the clause in which they occur. Note the coloration of agents (●) vs. patients (●).

| | Clause 1 | Clause 2 | Clause 3 | Clause 4 | Clause 5 | Clause 6 | Clause 7 | Clause 8 | Clause 9 | Clause 10 |
|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| He of the south | ● | | | | | | | | | |
| He of the north | ●● | | | ● | | | | | | |
| <i>Ajwalte</i> ’ | | | ● | | | | | | | |
| He of nine lands | | | ● | ● | | | | | ● | |
| <i>Took’ Yas(aan)</i> | | | | | ●● | | ●? | | | |
| <i>K’inich Lakamtun</i> King <i>Yaxa</i> ’ | | | | | ●● | | | | | |
| <i>Ajmutu’l</i> | | | | | | | | | ● | |
| Intransitive / Unknown | ○○ | ○ | | ○ | ○○ | ○ | | ○ | | ○ |

Verbs and Actions: With regards to the events that are related in the narrative these can be divided into three thematic categories. The first is one that we can term “War and Peace”, which covers not all too surprisingly the verbs of war and martial actions, including *puluuy* ‘set ablaze’ (used three times in the text) as well as *ch’ahkaj* ‘to axe, chop’, but also *pehka* ‘to call, shout, summon’, presumably to convene a meeting, parliament or a *parley*, in buccaneer (Houston 2014).

The second main category of verbs pertains to verbs of motion, referring to journeys and travels. These include *pakxi* ‘to return’ or ‘to walk to town’ (used four times in the narrative; making the Komkom Vase the written source with the largest number of instances of this verb, along with the corpus of Naj Tunich, see MacLeod and Stone 1995; Hull 2004: 92; Helmke 2009: 157-160), *ahni* ‘to run’, *lok’ooy* ‘to flee’ (used in reference to the defeated king of *Yaxa*’, not spoken about in flattering terms), and *t’abaay* literally ‘to raise, lift’ but also used in reference to ‘go up, climb’ as in ascending a prominent physiographic feature, such as an elevation, hill, or mountain (see Stuart 1998: 409-417). These evidently refer to how the various agents and patients displace themselves from one given location to another, providing a sense of movement across the landscape, from one given place to another.

Table 3. Division of the toponyms mentioned on the Komkom Vase according to narrative function and in order of appearance.

| Places of Origin | Places Attacked | Places Travelled to | Unclear / Other |
|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| <i>Wak Kabal</i> | <i>Sak Suutz'</i> | <i>Sak Kabniil</i> | <i>Chak Mayte'</i> |
| <i>Sak Nikte'</i> | <i>...k Witz(nal)</i> | <i>Ik' Naahb</i> | <i>Lakam Ha'(?)</i> |
| <i>Komkom (×2)</i> | <i>Yaxa'</i> | <i>Usu'l</i> | |
| <i>Sa'uul</i> | <i>Chan Naahb</i> | <i>Yaxa'</i> | |
| <i>Yaxa' (×2)</i> | <i>lb(il)</i> | eroded (×2) | |
| <i>Mutu'l</i> | <i>Pekom</i> | | |

The third and last main category of verbs are those pertaining to ritual actions. Interestingly, the number of rituals celebrated and their diversity is on par with the verbs of motion in the text. As such, even though much of the narrative is given over to events of war, the movement of people and the proper celebration of rituals are all held as equally important. The first verb pertains to igniting fire by means of friction, *joch'o'w k'ahk'* 'the fire is drilled', and is the very first event recorded in the narrative of the vase. Once the fire is drilled we see a series of martial actions wherein rival localities are set ablaze (*puluuy*), and based on the sequential structure of the narrative one can surmise that we are seeing direct cause and effect. A fire is ritually drilled and once this pure and untainted fire has come into being it is set to the task of subduing the enemy. The start of the second episode of the narrative is tied to the very beginning, and makes reference to the same fire ritual, but here the verbal expression provided is *jatz'liiy*. This expression employs the root *jatz'* 'to strike', which refers to the lighting of fires by means of percussion, producing sparks by striking two stones together. Although eroded, a deity impersonation ritual may also be referred to, read *ubaahilan ta k'uh* 'to be portrayed as a god', wherein a human figure wears the attire of a particular supernatural entity and adopts some of the demeanors and traits of a deity (see Houston and Stuart 1996: 297-300; Nehammer Knub et al. 2009). Interestingly, in this passage the deities impersonated appear to be those belonging to the king of *Yaxa'*, implying that

this may constitute an attempt to garner supernatural favors on the part of the victors, or alternatively to desecrate some of the local divinities. The last ritual is *yahk'ta*, 'it is his dance', which is also the very last event of the whole narrative. Thus, whereas it may seem odd to Western preconceptions of historical narratives, the culmination of the entire series of events appears to be a type of victory dance, celebrating the advent of a new *status quo*.

Toponyms: The text of the Komkom Vase offers an abundance of toponyms. The profusion of place names is truly remarkable since many events and actions were anchored in relation to specific locations, so as to better inform the reader of the landscape across which the story unfolds. Unfortunately, the vast majority of toponyms were unknown before the discovery of this vase and as such it is difficult to gauge where all of these events are supposed to take place. Nevertheless, the toponyms can be divided into a few higher order categories based on their function and the means by which they are introduced into the narrative. Thus, we can see that toponyms serve to designate 1) places of origin of particular actors, 2) names of localities attacked, 3) as places travelled to, and 4) a final category wherein the context is unclear due to breakage and erosion. Based on these divisions the toponyms can be presented as follows (Table 3).

This tabulation makes it clear that *Yaxa'* cross-cuts the various categories, and as such stands as one of the spatial nodes of the narrative. The toponyms occurring as places of

origin are all included into the titles of their bearers (such as the names of the mother and father of the original owner of the vase) or are prefixed by the agentive *aj-* marking folks as being from a particular place of origin, such as the ‘he of south’ and ‘he of north’ that are said to be of Naranjo when they are labeled as *Ajsa’uul* ‘Naranjeños’.

The places attacked form a diverse grouping of localities and aside from *Yaxa’*, we can comment on *Ib*—probably known more fully as *Ibil*—‘where there are lima beans’, a locality that is also known from ceramics produced at workshops tied to Motul de San José, Calakmul and from the texts of Naj Tunich (Tokovinine 2014: 11, 14). As we have proposed on earlier occasions, the location *Sak Suutz’* ‘white bat’ may be same as the settlement known as <*Zaczuç*> and <*Zaczuz*> in the ethnohistoric account of Spanish incursions to this part of the Maya area by Fray Bartolomé de Fuensalidas in 1641 (López de Cogolludo 1688: 645). Based on these accounts and the detailed documentary work of France Scholes and Sir J. Eric S. Thompson (1977: 45-46, map 2-r), they have been able to suggest that this settlement may have been located at the confluence of the Roaring Creek with the Belize River, just north of present-day Belmopan. As such, the archaeological site of Saturday Creek constitutes a promising candidate for this locality (an alternate locality is the site of Hanging Rock a.k.a. Irish Creek, to the southwest of Belmopan). As to the places travelled to these remain unknown, but that named *Usu’l* is of interest, since that is where the king of *Yaxa’* is said to have fled to after his defeat. An etymology of that toponym would see it segmented as *us-u’l* wherein the initial segment is ‘fly, mosquito, gnat’ based on a variety of cognates in Ch’olan languages followed by the suffix *-u’l* that indicates that a particular trait occurs in abundance at a given location (see Lacadena and Wichmann n.d.: 21-28). As such, the text would relate that the king of *Yaxa’* fled to a mosquito infested location, suffering humiliation heaped upon defeat.

Final Comments

The Komkom Vase represents an extremely important find, not only within the

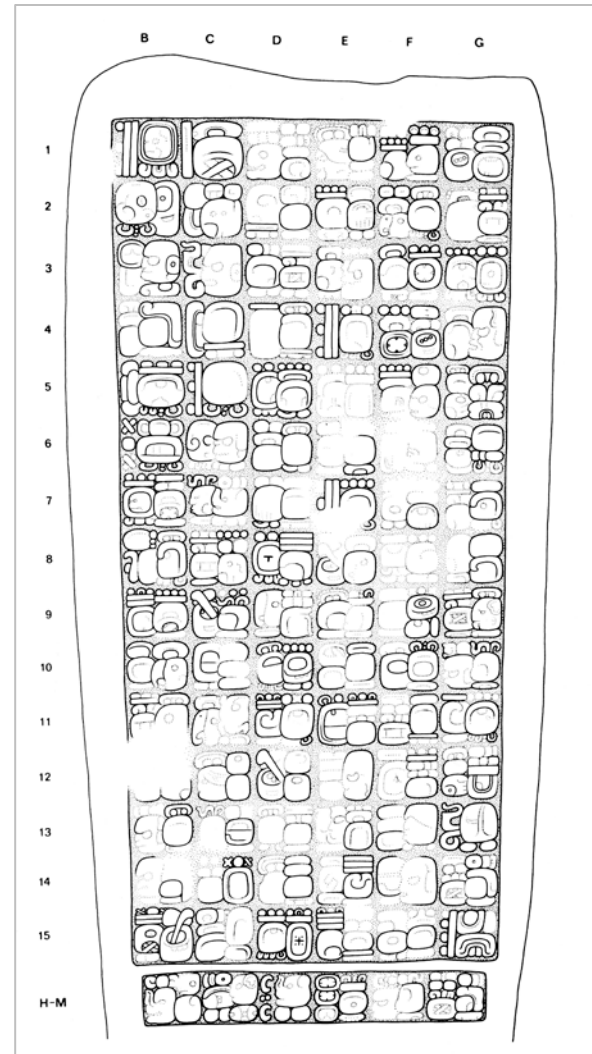


Figure 7. The back of Naranjo Stela 12 that shows several points of commonality with the text of the Komkom Vase (drawing by Ian Graham).

Belize Valley, but also to the Maya lowlands as a whole. Most all of the terms that can be used to describe it are superlatives. The text is the longest known for a ceramic vessel. The text is now the longest known text from Pre-Columbian Belize and is among the longest texts anywhere in the Maya world and this despite the relative lateness of its manufacture. The text records a lengthy Initial Series with a Long Count, a Supplementary Series and even a record in the 819-day calendar, which are all rare and atypical features of ceramic texts. The text highlights an array of different actors that were mostly unknown before the discovery of the text, with the exception of two elusive figures or group from Naranjo and the king of *Yaxa’* that was the

victim of repeated attacks during this period. Interestingly, the same figure is also recorded in the texts of Naranjo, suffering at the hands of her kings also, especially one “Itzamnaaj” *K’awil* (r. AD 784-810+). As such the vase provides us with a view of historical events that transpired at the very end of the eighth century, as recounted from the vantage of the Komkom kings. That their account is not identical to that provided on Stela 12 at Naranjo (Figure 7), where we have a contemporaneous text that recounts similar events taking place on identical dates, is not altogether surprising since these are distinct historical records, produced at different times by different courts. As we have seen, the vase dates to around AD 812, while Stela 12 at Naranjo was commemorated in August AD 800, which is to say that the latter is as contemporaneous as a historical record can be. Nevertheless, having two parallel accounts of similar events and actions is atypical in the Maya area, and provides us with key anchors wherein the two accounts coincide. This allows us a rare opportunity to compare the degree of congruence of events recounted on two different sources. What is more surprising, however, is that both accounts at times use precisely the same wording and phraseology, which suggests that perhaps both the text of Stela 12 and that of the Komkom Vase share a similar, if not the same written historical source. On the stela, the events are presented in more summary form, whereas on the vase these are effuse with details, to such an extent that this almost becomes an heuristic impediment, since so many of the parameters remain unknown, including agents, patients and localities. In addition to its detailed historical narrative, the Komkom Vase itself represents a singular moment in time when the kings of Baking Pot and Komkom were united in a common cause and the vase was used to cement an alliance between these two courts. Considering the time of this alliance, when the rule of divine kings was rapidly eroding, the vase instead stands for the ageless execution of standard functional operations. This is made clear by its length and the presence of an extensive calendrical record at the onset, as though the vase served the same function as a historical monument raised within the monumental epicenter of a site. As such the

vase, its text and its final context all speak evocatively of the socio-political reconfigurations that characterize the Terminal Classic and the cessation of the institution of kingship in this part of the Maya lowlands.

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